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ABSTRACT

This document examines an innovative marketing strategy developed by South Texas Community College (STCC) to promote its technical programs. In 2000, STCC organized the "Business Conference Institute" to develop 1-day conferences with the Division of Business, Math & Sciences (DBMS). The creation of this Institute linked the College with the local community, businesses, and prospective employers. Some recent conferences include: (1) "NAFTA: A New Direction"; (2) "E-Commerce: Your Next Business Opportunity"; (3) "Logistics: Linking the Border Businesses"; and (4) "Banking: Financing Your Business Growth: Emerging and Evolving Trends." Each conference was based on a technical program at STCC; thus, marketing promoted both the conference and the college. Thousands of brochures were mailed to businesses and the community, interviews with conference organizers were televised, and posters and full-page newspaper advertisements were established. As a result of these 1-day conferences, the College's technical programs have seen enrollment increases, and STCC is enjoying increased institutional visibility. The College has also earned the respect and recognition of the business community by providing forums for the exchange of ideas and information, and by bringing high-profile speakers and experts to the region. (RC)

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AN INNOVATIVE MARKETING MODEL: PROMOTING TECHNICAL PROGRAMS BY CONDUCTING ONE-DAY CONFERENCES

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Introduction

Community colleges have emerged as a flexible educational alternative, responsive to the needs of the changing work environment. Employers view community colleges as the developers of educational and training programs that prepare a workforce to fill the growing and emerging occupations (Wisner 1994, Lannan 1995). Responding to industry demands to train students for the new occupations have increased the pace of program development at community colleges. Whereas a decade ago, colleges were developing one or two new programs annually, today, they are developing numerous programs yearly to fulfill their role as the primary educational and occupational training source for their communities.

The volume of new program development and heightened public awareness have created the need for a comprehensive marketing campaign. Colleges can no longer rely solely on local newspaper ads to promote their programs (Zeiss 1986).

This paper examines an innovative marketing strategy developed by the Division of Business, Math & Sciences of South Texas Community Colleges (STCC) to promote its technical programs.

Marketing Strategy

In January 2000, South Texas Community College organized a new enterprise titled "Business Conference Institute" (BCI) as a profit-center. One of the main objectives of BCI is to jointly develop one-day conferences with the Division of Business, Math & Sciences based on its technical programs. The creation of this unit provided the organizational structure to enact an innovative approach to linking the college with the local community, businesses, and prospective

employers. The strategy of developing one-day conferences has proven valuable and has satisfied several objectives of the Division and the College.

Benefits to the Community:

- Promoting economic development in the community
- Providing continuing education opportunities for the community
- Supporting the business community by establishing diverse discussion forums
- Bringing nationally renown speakers and content experts to the local community

Benefits to the College:

- Increasing institutional visibility
- Promoting the College among prospective students
- Enhancing the College's image in the community
- Establishing the College as a training resource for the industries and business community
- Providing professional development opportunities for the College's staff and faculty

Benefits to the Division of Business, Math & Sciences:

- Marketing and promotion of technical programs
- Increasing enrollment in the technical programs
- Facilitating comprehensive marketing activities for the program
- Establishing a strong link between program's faculty and industry leaders
- Increasing the recruitment pool for instructors and advisory committee members
- Increasing the pool of businesses as sites for internships and placement of graduates

Benefits to the Business Conference Institute (BCI):

- Establishing a profit-center within the college system
- Becoming a source for offering business seminars to the business community
- Becoming a source for professional development for the public and private sectors
- Becoming a facilitator of workforce development and training for the community
- Becoming a source for gathering and maintaining a database of prospective employers and businesses to be used by the college for marketing purposes
- Becoming a contact source with media, television, radio, and newspaper

Conferences

Following are some recent one-day conferences held by the Division of Business, Math & Sciences.

NAFTA: A New Direction:

The NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) conference was held in March 2001. This conference provided a means to update the Import/Export business community in the Rio Grande Valley on prevailing issues. In addition, this conference informed attendees about investment opportunities in Mexico.

E-Commerce: Your Next Business Opportunity:

The E-Commerce (Electronic Commerce) conference was held in April 2001 and offered relevant comprehensive knowledge about the new trends in E-Commerce and introduced the attendees to various strategies to develop an E-Commerce business. In addition, it served as a professional development vehicle for the community and the College.

Logistics: Linking the Border Businesses:

This conference was held in August 2001. Practitioners from the region's maquiladoras constituted the majority of the audience of this conference. This conference explored current topics of interest, explained techniques for business improvements, and discussed the potential for future development of the industry in the Rio Grande Valley.

Banking: Financing Your Business Growth: Emerging and Evolving Trends:

This conference was held in November 16, 2001. It brought together economic development practitioners, business and industry groups, banks, researchers and state and federal governmental agencies to discuss the evolving and emerging trends in banking industry.

Promoting the Technical Programs

Traditionally, promotion of a new program was accomplished through ad campaigns in local newspapers and a mass mail-outs of promotional information to targeted lists of employers in the related fields. But, apparently, the ad campaigns and the mail outs were not sufficient marketing activities to promote new programs. There is a tacit consensus that there is a need for a comprehensive marketing strategy that would involve prospective employers, students, and the community (Marquez 2000, Cravens 1998, Kreider 1997).

The development of one-day conferences introduced a marketing campaign opportunity for promotion of technical programs. Each program on which a conference was based received the following direct and indirect marketing benefits:

- Development of professional quality, brochure about the conference and the related technical program
- Mail-out of brochures (6000) to area businesses, and community leaders
- Mail-out of the brochures (2000) industry related organizations

- Mail-out of the brochures (2000) by the area's Chambers of Commerce
- Interviewees conducted, by local television and radio stations, with the conference organizers promoting the conference and the technical programs
- Direct link on the conference webpage to the degree programs and departmental webpages
- Development of posters to announce conferences
- Dissemination of the brochures to list serves via the Internet
- Conference announcements disseminated by fax to local organizations
- Full-page ads in local papers announcing the conferences and their keynote speakers
- Newspaper articles highlighting conference agenda and the speakers
- On the day of the conference, local television stations conduct interviews with the speakers and conference organizers
- On the day of the conference, student organizations representing related college programs set up information booths to promote and recruit students for the program
- Distribution of program information to conference participants
- Announcement of the college's educational opportunities during the conference

Impact of the New Marketing Strategy

The Business Administration Program has seen enrollment increases in the technical programs that were attributable to the one-day conferences. However, the most significant benefit to South Texas Community College has been the increased institutional visibility, enhanced public image. This is consistent with the findings by Harris in 1998. Finally, the College has earned the respect and recognition the business community by providing forums for exchange of ideas and information, and by bringing high profile speakers and experts to the region.

Conclusions

Marketing programs based on one-day conferences may not be suitable for every community college. However, it should be clear that a one-shot ad campaign in local papers does not appear to be sufficient when marketing college programs. For a marketing strategy to be effective and successful, one has to develop a comprehensive strategy that will involve the College, employers, and the community.

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